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PROPOSED PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1994-1995

Abolition of 19 posts in the Office of Conference Services

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In its resolution 48/228, section II, paragraph 41, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a report to the Assembly at its resumed forty-eighth session giving justification for his proposals to abolish 19 posts in the Office of Conference Services, describing carefully the impact of such proposals on the activities of the Office and programme delivery and to submit proposals in that regard.

2. Of the 19 posts proposed for abolition in the proposed programme budget for 1994-1995 (see A/48/6, para. 25E.9), 16 were in the translation services, 2 in the interpretation service and 1 in the publishing service. The abolition of the interpreter posts will be offset by the recruitment of freelance interpreters as required to ensure programme delivery.

II. EVOLUTION OF THE TRANSLATION WORKLOAD AT HEADQUARTERS

3. Since the adoption of General Assembly resolution 48/228, the actual workload statistics for 1992-1993 have become available, and the assumptions on which the budgetary proposals were based have been re-examined. The statistics show that the translation workload at Headquarters increased 19.5 per cent in 1992-1993 over 1990-1991, when the translation workload had already returned to the level existing prior to the 1987 financial crisis. To put this workload in perspective, statistics have been compiled, drawing on the proposed programme budgets going back to 1972-1973, and are shown in the table below.

Workload statistics for translation, Headquarters, 1972-1993 a/

Biennium	Thousands of words	Percentage change compared with previous biennium
		%
1972-1973	136 242	
1974-1975	150 932	10.8
1976-1977	146 161	-3.2
1978-1979	141 386	-3.3
1980-1981	132 088	-6.6
1982-1983	161 140	22.0
1984-1985	153 500	-4.7
1986-1987	149 804	-2.4
1988-1989	140 689	-6.1
1990-1991	154 778	10.0
1992-1993	184 924	19.5

a/ Excluding contractual translation.

4. As can be seen, the 184.9 million words, the equivalent of 560,303 pages, translated and/or revised in 1992-1993 was the highest level ever experienced. The increase of 19.5 per cent over the previous biennium compares with workload projections in the proposed programme budget for 1994-1995 of 11.1 per cent over the 1990-1991 level. Thus, the language services had to cope with a level of demand, especially towards the end of 1993, that could not have been foreseen on the basis of past experience.

5. The reasons for this level of demand need to be analysed. Undoubtedly, the increased activity of the Security Council is a major factor. To illustrate, there were 124 meetings of the Security Council in 1988-1989, 123 in 1990-1991 and 304 in 1992-1993. The number of consultations of the whole rose from 142 in 1988-1989, to 195 in 1990-1991 and 441 in 1992-1993. Translation workloads relating to political and Security Council activities increased from 39,600 pages in 1988-1989 to 71,500 in 1990-1991 and 160,300 in 1992-1993. Aside from the requirements of the Security Council itself, the expansion of peace-keeping operations has also increased the related work of the General Assembly, which

approves their financing. There have also been other new areas of activity, such as sustainable development. A proliferation of documentation may be characteristic of the early phases of programme development, when there is typically a surge of activity as a new policy issue is studied from various aspects. The experience with the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development is in some ways reminiscent of the spur in growth in the economic and social areas in the 1970s and early 1980s. That development, it may be recalled, was followed by the institution of measures to control and limit documentation.

6. The Secretary-General appreciates that Member States have recognized the need to reinforce measures to control and limit documentation. In particular, the Committee on Conferences has recommended new measures to ensure the optimum utilization of conference services (A/48/32/Rev.1, annex II) and urged intergovernmental bodies to improve their procedures and reduce their documentation requirements, including requirements for meeting records. The General Assembly has recommended that those measures be implemented as applicable by all subsidiary organs (resolution 48/222). The Secretary-General has established an interdepartmental task force to enforce the regulations on the control and limitation of documentation, particularly the timely submission of documentation by substantive departments to the Office of Conference Services for processing and the observance of the maximum length of documentation, as well as to bring to the attention of Member States the views of the Secretary-General on areas where documentation might be reduced.

7. Not only has there been an increase in the volume of the work, but there have also been major changes in the calendar of conferences that have changed the pattern of meetings. The General Assembly has been increasingly holding resumed sessions in the first half of the year, and the Economic and Social Council has changed the timing and venue of its sessions. In addition, there have been other changes in the number and distribution of meetings with the restructuring of intergovernmental bodies in the economic and social areas. While some of these changes are in line with the recommendations of the Group of High-level Intergovernmental Experts to Review the Efficiency of the Administrative and Financial Functioning of the United Nations, 1/ as approved by the General Assembly in resolution 41/213, these changes none the less add to the unpredictability of the pattern of meetings at this time.

III. RATIONALE FOR THE ABOLITION OF THE 19 POSTS

8. The abolition of 19 posts in the Office of Conference Services should be considered in the framework of the overall level of resources requested in section 25E of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1994-1995. Permanent conference-servicing resources are normally programmed below the projected workload levels and are augmented when necessary through the use of temporary staff. This makes it possible to adjust the staffing level to peak workload requirements at particular times of the year and to avoid the costs of unutilized capacity. Furthermore, the Secretary-General has proposed total resources for permanent and temporary staff, including a significant increase in the appropriation for temporary staff compared with the initial appropriation for 1992-1993, based on the level of estimated actual 1992-1993 expenditures.

9. Taken together with the abolition of the 19 established posts, therefore, the Secretary-General's proposed programme budget involved some shift of resources from permanent to temporary staff, but did not reduce the overall resources proposed for staffing in the Office of Conference Services. Accordingly, the abolition of 19 established posts should not, by itself, have an adverse impact on the delivery of conference services in 1994-1995. Delays in the issuance of documentation and any possible decline in quality that are attributable to the factors outlined in paragraphs 3 to 7 above, including the late submission of documentation by substantive departments, will be addressed within their relevant contexts.

10. In addition, as indicated in the proposed programme budget, efforts will continue to increase productivity in conference services through improved management and further investment in technological innovations. The possibilities of shifting work among conference centres is also being fully explored to improve the overall utilization of capacity. Collaboration with substantive and technical secretariats will be strengthened to ensure the most efficient use of resources, and measures approved by intergovernmental bodies to reduce documentation and interpretation requirements will be implemented. As requested by the General Assembly, the Secretary-General is reviewing the organization, management and resource requirements of the Office of Conference Services.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

11. In compliance with General Assembly resolutions 46/190 and 47/202 C, the Secretary-General is continuing to review the organization and management of the Office of Conference Services. In resolution 48/228, section II, paragraph 42, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a comprehensive study on the organization, management and human resource requirements of conference services as a basis for the consideration of his programme budget proposals for 1996-1997. The Secretary-General intends to review the level of permanent conference-servicing capacity as part of that study and, based on the results, to make proposals in the proposed programme budget for 1996-1997. As part of that study, the Secretary-General also intends to review the methods being used to forecast demand and to try to develop better cost information that, in the longer run, would facilitate Member States' making an assessment of the volume, quality, timeliness and cost of the services with which they wish to be provided.

12. Also, in resolution 47/202 B, paragraph 16, the General Assembly decided to undertake a comprehensive review at its forty-ninth session of, inter alia, the need for and usefulness and timely issuance of verbatim and summary records on the basis of a report to be submitted by the Secretary-General. At its forty-seventh and forty-eighth sessions, the Assembly requested intergovernmental bodies to review their entitlement to verbatim or summary records. The Assembly may therefore decide to modify such entitlements as a result of its deliberations during the forty-ninth session, with consequences for conference-servicing requirements.

13. At this juncture, it is difficult to predict how the demand for conference services will evolve. Furthermore, as can be seen from the statistics for the past 20 years, the workload may vary from one biennium to the next. At the same time, productivity has been increasing and, with the continued application of technological innovations, this trend should continue. The Secretary-General intends to keep under review the relationship between conference-servicing requirements and programmatic growth with a view to ensuring an acceptable level and quality of services. The appropriate balance between permanent and temporary staff will also be kept under review.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-first Session, Supplement No. 49 (A/41/49).